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ABSTRACT

Politics has always made strange bedfellows, but now the public and the traditional academy are collaborating in an attack on the site of their uneasiness--what they label "political correctness as neo-fascism" and what one composition teacher calls "political correctness as challenge to ideological assumptions." In their attacks on "illiberal education," the voices of the orthodox backlash have seized upon the well-tempered, double-edged blade of political correctness and turned it into a clumsy cudgel. The central technique is publicly to discredit the efforts of many by the association with the excesses of a few. Another closely related tactic is the "slippery slope": wanting to include a non-canonical writer in a course will lead to the squeezing out of Shakespeare. Many analysts of the "political correctness" debate locate the intersection of values and language as the heart of the matter. The backlash against so-called political correctness is another manifestation of middle-class anxiety and cultural hegemony. The backlash has not really cracked into Canadian composition classrooms. Composition teachers can best point out the assumptions and limitations of existing orthodoxy (as well as alternatives) in the composition classroom, where they deal every day with language's construction of knowledge and reality. (RS)

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The Backlash Against Political Correctness -- A Perspective from a Canadian Composition Classroom

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"This shows how much easier it is to be critical than to be correct." Disraeli

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Note

The following paper is a slightly revised version of one delivered at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, a US-American organization of post-secondary teachers and scholars in composition and rhetoric. As a Canadian, I tried to bring another perspective to the discussion of "political correctness."

Preamble

When I proposed in the spring of 1991 that the backlash against "political correctness" deserved and demanded our serious attention and discussion, I did so because I was angry and because I was afraid. Little has changed in the intervening year.

Some people claim that Canadians get everything -- from acid rain to educational crises -- second-hand from the U.S. I think that the US-American experience has precipitated our own crisis; nevertheless, I think we have enough difference and distance from that US-American experience to be able to see perhaps a little more clearly what is going on.

This is my generalization; my personalization will follow.

Just as our society has been able to tolerate universities as a largely desirable evil, so universities have been able to tolerate, through a kind of benign oversight, certain critical spaces within their elitist structures -- women's studies, cultural studies, composition. For a variety of reasons, many of them economic, that tolerance is at a new low, and something astonishing (at least to me) is happening. Politics has always made strange bedfellows, but now we are treated to the sight of the public and the traditional academy collaborating in an attack on the site of their uneasiness -- what they label "political correctness as neo-fascism" and what I call the "political correctness as challenge to ideological assumptions".

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It is this collaboration that strikes fear into my heart, and drives me to address, to audiences both inside and outside the academy, the deliberate misunderstanding that drives the backlash.

The Joy of Correctness, and the Shadow of Doubt

I don't know how to describe the word "correct". When I was a perfectionist child at school, I remember it having a satisfying roundness and roll on the tongue, with a thrilling snap to its final consonants. To be correct was to be right, with a shiver in it, to snatch the right answer from between the teeth of error.

When I first taught composition, years later, I found that the pleasure had gone out of the word -- though I could still pronounce it unselfconsciously, I could also hear for the first time how those teeth bit and gnashed and worried at students till their papers bled. After my Road-to-Damascus encounter with Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations*, I rejected the concept of correctness as "politically incorrect."

I already prided myself on having rejected the concept of correctness in my literature classrooms. When a former colleague used to complain of the burdensome number of student essays she had to "correct", in one weekend, I felt so superior -- at university, I hoped, we did not "correct" essays; we read them, mentored their writers, facilitated their entry to the discourse community, and (but only as a nasty bureaucratic requirement related to course credit and grade point averages) evaluated them. I thought, smugly, that my colleague was betraying her own history -- she had been an elementary-school teacher, and was still a nun. My conscience plagues me about this smugness to this day -- she was at least honest about her orthodoxy.

Another memory of a new use of the word -- how we used to say, lightly, in department meetings, "Oh, no, let's not do that. It wouldn't be politically correct." We used it ironically, often sketching the scare-quotes in the air, as a way of invoking principles struggled over in other contexts and now to be established in departmental practice -- such earth-shattering principles as, for instance, the use of inclusive language in official documents.

And I remember how we used the term, again lightly, to mock our own seriousness -- "Are you sure it's politically correct to hold an English Society Banquet on the theme of Arabian Nights?"

On "Political Correctness"

Writing in *The Women's Review of Books* (IX:5, February 1992), Ruth Perry puts reminiscences like these in a broader context, tracing the use of the term "politically correct" from the New Left of the mid to late sixties, through feminism in the eighties, to the backlash we are facing today. Perry says of the phrase, "Like a recurring refrain in a song, or an incantatory line in a poem, its meaning changes each time it appears." There are, however, two main directions the shifting meaning takes, or as Perry says, "it has always been double-edged."

> No sooner was [the phrase] invoked as a standard for sociopolitical practice ... than it was mocked as purist, ideologically rigid, and authoritarian. ... Usually marked with quotation marks or italics, it expressed a combination of distrust for party lines of any kind and a simultaneous commitment to whichever dimension of social change that person was working for.

In their attacks on "illiberal education" (D'Souza), the voices of the orthodox backlash have seized upon this well-tempered, double-edged blade, and turned it into a clumsy cudgel. Clumsy, but brutally

effective, I fear, as caricature however crude often is. For the backlash is managing the attack on two fronts at once. The central technique is publicly to discredit the efforts of many by the association with the excesses of a few. We well-trained rhetoricians and logicians can easily identify the fallacies at work: here, the overgeneralization and the dizzying slippery slope. .

One of the examples frequently quoted in Canada as evidence of the evils of political correctness begins with an anthropologist and the Royal Ontario Museum. Two years ago, Jeanne Cannizzo curated an exhibition of nineteenth-century missionary efforts in Africa. I moved to Toronto too late to see it for myself, but I understand that Ms Cannizzo's exhibition drew heavily on contemporary materials to condemn Victorian imperialists-cum-missionaries out of their own mouths. The show provoked strong reaction -- the museum was picketed and the planned tour of the exhibition cancelled -- after Toronto's black community condemned it as racist in effect (if not perhaps in intention). You can imagine, perhaps, how offensive a Victorian representation of Africa as a "dark continent peopled by savages and cannibals" was. One museum guard is reported to have said, acutely, that much of the problem lay in the fact that the visual images were immediate and strong, whereas the material which analyzed and criticized those images in a historical and theoretical context was in print. Museum-goers needed to invest time and energy in reading to counter the effect of the images. A museum-goer who browsed rather than ruminated, who looked rather than read -- and many museum-goers fit that profile -- would be unlikely to get the curator's point, and would see only a perpetuation, not a critique, of Victorian racism.

The rights and wrongs of the exhibition are complex and endlessly debatable, but the sequel is much less ambiguous. The curator undertook to teach an anthropology course at the University of Toronto; her course (unconnected with the exhibition) was repeatedly disrupted by hecklers, many of them not registered students, who accused her of racism. Eventually, harassed both in and out of class, she took extended leave.

Let me be clear on this point: there is no excuse for such behaviour. I condemn it utterly.

On our side of the border, this case has become a rallying point for those who condemn "political correctness." Here is p.c. at work, they say, the destruction of academic freedom, a terror campaign by the "thought police." The effect is two-fold. The public shudders; alumni are horrified. Thought police on the campus; intellectual terrorism in the ivory tower! (Public reactions like this are important -- governments, desperate to cut budgets in these recessionary times, are pleased to see a whole expensive category of spending become the object of public fear and loathing rather than admiration.)

The second effect is within the academy: we distance ourselves from those excesses. If that is political correctness (it isn't, let me remind you, it is an overgeneralization from an excess), but, if that is political correctness, we say, then I want nothing to do with it. It is a technique and a reaction that Susan Faludi has described in her book *Backlash*: make "feminism" a dirty word in the public mind, associate it with bitterness, stridency, and personal misery, and then (surprise, surprise) young women will deny that they are feminists, and the death of feminism, the beginning of a post-feminist world, can be declared.

I have said that overgeneralization from unrepresentative behaviour is one technique used in the backlash; the other, closely related, is the "slippery slope". Challenging certain long-held assumptions may not, I am allowed, turn me into a thought-police recruit automatically and immediately, only insidiously and inevitably. Wanting to include a non-canonical writer in a course will lead to the squeezing out of Shakespeare: "deconstructing the literary patriarchy" is equated by one writer with "getting Shakespeare off survey courses and replacing him with testimonials written by oppressed Guatemalan women" (Conlogue). The same writer, invoking the "melancholy memory" of Chinese statues and monuments smashed by the Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution, gave his column

the alarmist title, "How long might it take to repair the damage wrought by the PC movement?"

Voices of the backlash claim to draw on the noble tradition of the liberal arts in their defense of academic freedom and freedom of expression -- one University of Toronto professor, writing for the newspaper, called upon Milton's *Areopagitica* and Mill's *On Liberty* within two paragraphs (Smith). These pieces make wonderful texts for analysis in writing classes: we have discovered logical fallacies, and appeals to emotion disguised as appeals to authority, and appeals to authority presented as truth. Excluded middles, personal attack, equivocation, false analogy, reduction to the absurd (in addition to the ubiquitous overgeneralization and slippery slope) crowd the texts -- but, as my students pointed out, identifying fallacies doesn't weaken their general effect. The published essays have a tremendous impact; the rebuttals which we submit do not get published. (*The Globe and Mail*'s Arts and Books editor explained, "The public media are not the place for the detailed analysis of argument.")

At this point, one of my students threw up her hands and said, "What's the use? There may not be a conspiracy out there, an intended and concerted effort to quell changes, but the effect is strong enough. I already know how to get a traditional A; maybe I'll concentrate on that and change the world when I get out of here."

Here is a different attitude from the one Mike Bygrave, writing from a British perspective, identified: "In a sense, PC is the politics of despair, or even of irrelevance. Changing the curriculum is what you do when there is no hope of changing the government." My student, despairing of changing the curriculum, has not yet given up on changing the government.

A feminist might read this difference differently: noting, for instance, how Bygrave thinks of activism in terms of changing a government -- who is at the pinnacle of a patriarchal structure of power; my

student thinks more globally (and more ironically). A feminist also knows that unlike many other nonconforming, reforming or resisting movements, time is on feminism's side -- feminism is strengthened by its encounter with the real world. Many a young woman declares herself a feminist several years after she declared from the relative sanctuary of the schoolroom that the need for feminism was past. Real life has that effect on women, as Gloria Steinem noted as long ago as 1979.

She might be wise, however, my student who wants to get a traditional A. It will, after all, give her a certain credibility when she comes to confront the system. I have always been glad I made a similar choice twenty years ago -- though then I never thought I'd want to challenge the system; I only, very desperately, wanted in. And at least, because she has undergone the experience of analyzing these issues in composition classes, and of contributing to the debate, she has already begun to see the politics of orthodoxy. Perhaps it will not take her twenty years to ask the basic questions a detective must ask if she is to elucidate a mystery or uncover an injustice.

Cui bono? To whose benefit is this situation? When Professor Smith quotes Milton, "Let truth and falsehood grapple freely, for whoever knew truth put to the worst, in a free and open encounter?", whose truth are they talking about? And how free and open an encounter is it, when the arena is open only to certain privileged groups? Who benefits, and who is excluded?

Language and Values

Let me approach this point from another direction. Many analysts of the "political correctness" debate locate the intersection of values and language as the heart of the matter. Some of them harrumph that, under the influence of deconstruction, texts no longer have any hierarchy of value -- one text is as good as another. One such writer, referring to Derrida as "a reactionary intellectual fraud who has made a

laughing stock of North American academia," snorted (as he sped down his slippery slope)

> If one work of literature is truly not privileged over another, then nothing prevents the wholesale dismantling of the classical curriculum (Conlogue).

Other writers recognize that the classical curriculum privileges not only certain texts, but also certain kinds of language and therefore certain ideas:

> The debate concerns [one philosopher writes] the claim of [the "great books" of western civilization] to provide the vocabulary in which social questions are to be thought out. The trouble is, although those books claim to provide a vocabulary for all, they have historically been the property of the few in a way that may be no accident (Ripstein).

Therefore it makes sense that

> PC follows one of the [Civil Rights] Movement's strategies, of seeking social change through manipulating language (Bygrave).

These voices are all from the public media; scholarly and critical voices also analyse the issue. In an frequently quoted passage, Antonio Gramsci puts it this way:

> Each time that in one way or another the question of language comes to the fore, that signifies that a series of other problems is about to emerge, the formation and enlarging of the ruling class, the necessity to establish more "intimate" and sure relations between ruling groups and the national popular masses, that is the reorganization of cultural hegemony. (qtd Trimbur, 280)

John Trimbur has already applied Gramsci's insight to "literacy crises" which he claims have served as "strategic sites ... for the reorganization of hegemony", that is, "the consolidation of political authority by the state through consent rather than coercion, and the establishment of the leadership of one particular class or political group in relation to other classes and political groups (280). His analysis of literacy crises (crises of anxiety over the progress or decline of literacy) is well worth reading in itself and for its applications to the "political correctness" backlash. Trimbur summarizes his own argument:

> The discourse that puts literacy into crisis during the nineteenth century and again at the turn of the century is a discourse about the ongoing crisis of the middle class. [Such crises concentrate] middle-class fears of loss of status, downward mobility and the prospect of sinking into the working class or urban poor. These fears moreover, [lead] the middle classes to identify their private interests with an increasingly stratified and meritocratic order in education. Redefined as a cognitive instead of a moral measure of the individual, literacy [is] simultaneously reaffirmed as the middle classes' primary hope of upward mobility, social status and respectability --a cultural marker to divide them and their credentials from the poor and the working-class below. (Trimbur, 293)

It is my argument that the backlash against so-called political correctness is another manifestation of this middle-class anxiety and cultural hegemony. The connection is made explicitly when one considers the term "cultural literacy", which I take to mean a further test of an individual's fitness for membership in the middle-class club. If literacy is the cognitive test of membership, a "credential" in Trimbur's terms, or "a form of cultural capital" (294), then "cultural literacy" is another form of cultural capital: we are not to leave our class without it. "Cultural literacy" (which always ought to have a capital C, because it is always privileged canonical Culture which is meant by the term) will get us past the gatekeepers who otherwise would recognize us aliens and outsiders. Trimbur again:

> Fear of downward mobility and loss of status has repeatedly been displaced and refigured as a fear of the alien and the other. (293)

Here is the genesis of the anti-p.c. backlash. The insiders are under threat; in addition to the usual pressures from outside (demands for relevance and accountability, cutbacks in funding), the cultural hegemony faces a challenge from within. It is, I suspect, especially cutting that the challenge comes from those who presented impeccable credentials at the door, and were admitted to the sanctum, but then refused to sink into the gentlemanly comfort and join in the civilized chitchat on the established terms.

What surprises me and gives me some hope -- to bring it back to composition -- is that the backlash has not really cracked into our composition classes. Again, I must speak personally. For ten years, I have been far more critical of the cultural hegemony in my writing classes than I dared (until fairly recently) to be in literature classes -- and I don't just mean discussing the "political correctness" of the third person singular pronoun. When I read essays such as Christy Friend's "The Excluded Conflict" in the most recent *College English*, I expect to hear the hounds of the backlash baying in the background. She identifies a largely unchallenged assumption in English studies, "that it is more important to teach students to read and understand than to teach them to create texts," because "by focusing on reading and excluding writing, English departments serve the dominant society's need for literate but passive citizens and limit the possibility that students will engage in what Freire calls 'praxis'" (285).

That is not to say that all writing teachers are liberatory; they are too busy helping students to "gain enough skill in writing to fit into the larger society, to do their jobs efficiently and accurately" (Friend, 282). It is probably easier for writing teachers in Canadian universities, less burdened with what US-American universities call Basic Writing, to use language to "deal creatively with reality and discover

how to participate in the transformation of [the] world" (Freire, qtd Friend, 283).

The very marginalization of composition which Friend and most writing teachers lament makes it a possibility, by providing a space within the institutional structure. If the cultural hegemony thought that we did anything in our composition classrooms but act as handmaids to the real education taking place elsewhere, then we would bring their wrath upon our heads immediately.

Inconclusion [sic]

My last word is no final word. I urge my colleagues to resist the backlash and to resist the excesses of "political correctness" that fuel the backlash. The threat of the backlash is real, but the vehemence of it is, also, encouraging evidence that our challenge to orthodoxy is real and felt.

Carved in the stone portico of my college building is the Biblical motto "The Truth Shall Make you Free". The Methodists who inscribed themselves in stone that way had confidence in their truth -- a patriarchal Christian vision pretending to be universal and eternal. I don't want to obliterate that inscription; I do want to point out its assumptions and limitations, and its alternatives. And we can do that best, surely, in the composition class, where we deal every day with language's construction of knowledge and reality. It is language that makes for freedom.

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